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The Culture of Australian Football at the East Melbourne Cricket Ground, 1878–1921

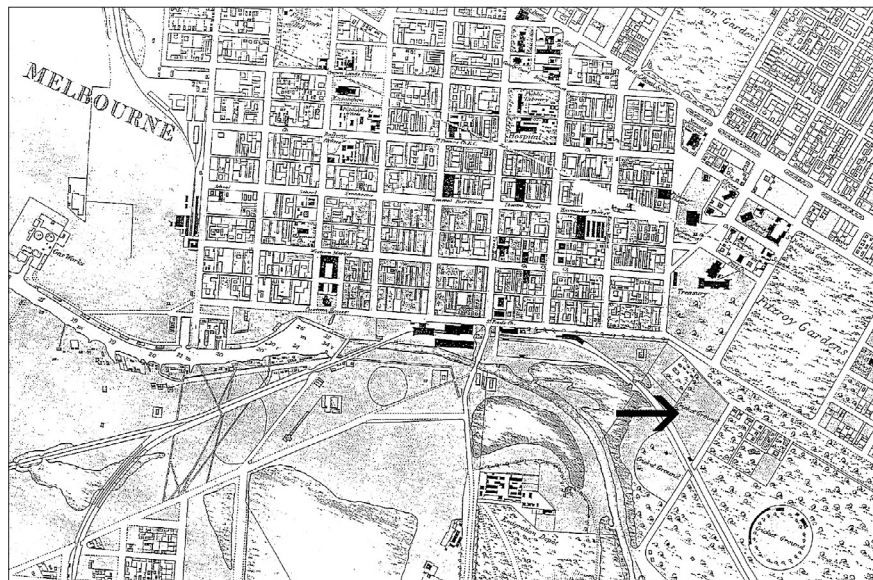
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A fragment of film exists from an Australian football match at the East Melbourne Cricket Ground (EMCG) between Essendon and Geelong in 1911. The players are seen running from the main pavilion onto the field. There are curious details, such as the dog that runs out with one of the men, and a boy onlooker who strokes the arm of his hero as if to lend him moral support as the player comes onto the ground. The Geelong players, then nicknamed the Pivotonians, are attired in their nineteenth-century style lace-up guernseys. The men of both clubs are wearing knickerbockers. It is a scene from a culture of football that no longer exists, filmed at a ground that also no longer exists.¹

In 1921, ten years after this match, the EMCG, once a popular inner-city sports area was compulsorily reclaimed by the Victorian Railways, directed by Chairman Harold Clapp, to make way for a holding yard as part of its new electrified train system. It had been the home of the ill-starred University Football Club from 1908 to 1910, and the home, more significantly, of the Essendon Football Club from 1882 before the latter club migrated to the

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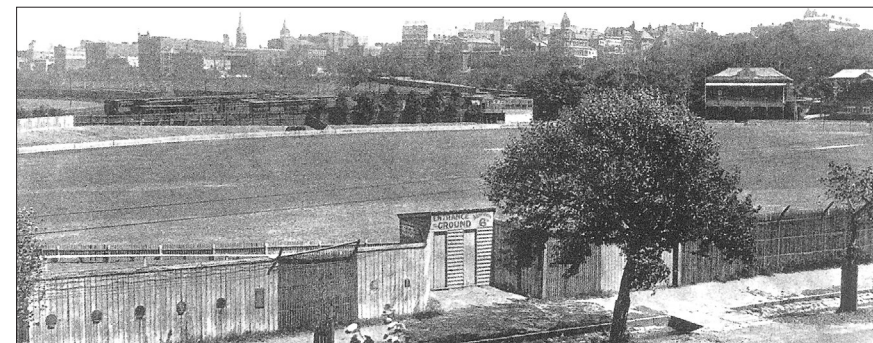


Map of Melbourne, showing the East Melbourne Cricket Ground (arrowed). The Melbourne Cricket Ground is to the right. Hobson Bay and Yarra River surveyed by H. L. Cox, 1866.

MAPS COLLECTION, STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA.

Essendon Recreation Reserve ('Windy Hill') in time for the 1922 season. Yet its closure did not cause a major public protest, even though in significance the EMCG at that time rivalled that of its immediate neighbour, the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG).

Every football ground has its own ghosts and secrets. What meanings and associations did people attach to the EMCG? What was the culture of the Ground, especially in football terms? And why was its closure so meekly accepted by the football public? The ground's demise in 1921 did not produce an outcry from the football public for a number of reasons. One was that although the EMCG was a popular ground because of its proximity to the centre of the city and had serviced football fans for four decades with some of the greatest games in the colony/state, the tenancy of the Essendon Football Club, and to a lesser extent University, it was exceptional in the sense that these clubs did not rely on the support of local barrackers and sponsors. Without a local East Melbourne support base, the Essendon club was homeless. The passive response to the EMCG's end also reflected football being beholden to cricket clubs until the building of Waverley Park. However, this fact conceals more than it reveals, because as landlords cricket clubs had become well aware of the enormous potential for revenue offered to them by their football club tenants.



A view of the seldom photographed East Melbourne Cricket Ground, looking west from Jolimont Road. MARC FIDDIAN COLLECTION.

Between 1878 and 1896, 245 Victorian Football Association (VFA) and Inter-Colonial football matches were played at the EMCG, with additional VFA finals during the first two decades of the twentieth century. There were another 225 Victorian Football League (VFL) matches contested between 1897 and 1921. This represents an average of more than 10 senior matches in each of its 44 seasons. But the Ground slipped from view after 1921 and has largely been forgotten. Memory of it has been erased so completely that the EMCG fails to merit its own entry in the *Encyclopedia of Melbourne*. Many otherwise well-informed historians also cannot locate the ground, and the thorough history of the University Football Club notes the Club's experience at the Ground only briefly.²

The EMCG was born in 1860 when a group of young men, centred around an enterprising Scotch College student, Alfred E. Clarke, recognised the sporting potential of the space to the west of Jolimont Road known as Captain Lonsdale's Cow Paddock.³ Thus began a cricket story of great importance to the young Colony for it became the home for the powerful East Melbourne Cricket Club (EMCC) for 60 summers.⁴ During the 1860s the MCG and the EMCG were the city's two major cricketing venues. In football matches, the EMCG ran north-south, as did the Punt Road Oval in Richmond, while the MCG later had its football played east-west. The nearby parklands of Yarra Park accommodated football all through the 1860s and 1870s because the cricket authorities wanted to keep their ovals intact.⁵ At East Melbourne, the football action went up and down the playing space parallel with Jolimont Road, where a row of pretty terrace houses ran along the eastern side. There was a similar effect at the Brunswick Street Oval and, to some extent, at Victoria Park. In each case, the quality of these houses reflected the comparative wealth of the area — North Fitzroy was relatively more affluent than Collingwood, but East Melbourne's terraces betokened an even wealthier neighbourhood.

The 'identity' of the EMCG was connected to that of the EMCC. The latter did not enjoy quite the prestige of the MCC, but it was often more successful on the field and worked hard to compete with its more exclusive neighbour. This is not to suggest that the EMCC was an underdog in its struggle with the MCC, for it was a powerful rival that made the most of the means at its disposal to compete with a more established competitor. During the 1860s it was not unusual for some of the colony's elite, such as merchants, pastoralists and other professionals to be members of both clubs (the EMCC honorary secretary Henry Hale Budd was a member of both clubs). However, as the decade progressed the MCC went into decline and the MCG was somewhat neglected. This led the *Australasian's* 'Longstop' to complain in 1868 that the MCG surface was 'chock-full of weeds' and resembled a 'hay-field'. This was in stark contrast to the field at the EMCG: the correspondent could 'guarantee there are no better wickets to be got than on the East Melbourne ground at the present time'.⁶

In the interim, EMCC president Alfred E. Clarke pushed for the introduction of a Challenge Cup to increase cricket attendances. The MCC supported the move and the cup proved to be popular during the early- to mid-1870s. The 'Jolimonters' from the EMCC keep a firm grip on this cup, but several disputes eventually brought an end to the competition. Then, in search of extra funds, the MCC enticed W. G. Grace to tour the colony in 1873. Such events — though sometimes providing windfall profits for cricket clubs — were not a consistent source of income. The MCC was already a conservative establishment, but in 1876 it made moves to capitalise on its assets. In May of that year the Club announced that it would build a new pavilion and permanent grandstand to seat 2,000 patrons. The MCC hoped that the cost of this venture would be covered by debentures and perhaps James Lillywhite's cricket tour of the colony in 1877. It was also anticipated that these amenities would increase the Club's membership base.

There was another reason for this enthusiasm for making improvements to the MCG: the comparative power of the EMCC and its superior playing ground. The EMCG posed a threat to the MCG's preeminence because the EMCC was the strongest cricket club in the colony and could claim 130 more members than the 'gentlemen from the MCC'. Indeed, MCC member and football pioneer, W.J. Hammersley believed that East Melbourne had 'the best playing ground in the colony' and that it was 'nearer to Melbourne, and more favoured by the public'.⁷ A month after the MCC announced its desire to improve facilities at the MCG the EMCC revealed similar plans for the EMCG. It intended to increase the attendance capacity to 20,000, construct a new grandstand seating 700, erect a fence along the western side of the ground, and build 'a widened sloping embankment that would enable onlookers to stand 20 deep with comfort'.⁸ In addition, the EMCC gained

permission from the Minister of Lands to charge admission to matches.

The rivalry between the two clubs descended into war in June 1876 when EMCC secretary Henry Hale Budd, as an MCC member, attended the MCC's meeting called to discuss the construction of a new stand and pavilion. Budd attacked the proposal and claimed that members were overestimating the income that would come from the stands and that the club would not be able to pay off the debt incurred to build them. He then triumphantly announced that Jack Conway had organised a deal with James Lillywhite in which his touring English cricket team would play all their matches at East Melbourne (Lillywhite later switched to the MCG).⁹ The main reason Budd opposed the project was that it threatened the interests of the EMCC. The EMCC followed up its June announcement with another meeting in September to agree upon a raft of proposals to raise £1,000 by means of £5 debentures and to spend £800 on a new grandstand and the remaining £200 on improving the EMCG.¹⁰ This set the tone for acrimonious relations between the clubs for the rest of the century. The EMCC saw the MCC as 'the enemy' and rarely provided any favours for the 'gentlemen over the way', which in some MCC quarters was interpreted as a lack of respect. For the most part the MCC and MCG reigned supreme — but the EMCC and the EMCG were far from being marginal inner-city entities.

The MCC made considerable profits from the new grandstand during Lillywhite's matches, and its famous reverse grandstand was erected at the beginning of 1877. The stand faced the MCG during the cricket season and in the winter fronted the so-called 'Melbourne Ground', a field in the Richmond Paddock adjacent to the north side of the MCG. The grandstand assisted supporters of the Melbourne Football Club but was built primarily to maximise profits for the MCC, with gate money collected from patrons to the grandstand at cricket and football matches. Only after being asked did the MCC concede the Melbourne Football Club a share of 20 per cent from the stand's net profits, and sometimes this percentage was increased. The grandstand also gave the Melbourne Football Club a steady revenue stream and it encouraged the MCC to help improve the football field in the Richmond Paddock.

The MCC had made the first steps towards profiting from football, but despite these initiatives cricket clubs struggled to secure enough funds to generate 'comfortable' financial positions. They therefore began to develop a greater appreciation of the drawing power of football as a way to increase profits. This tended to outweigh fears that football would damage the ground's surface. The most lucrative outcome came when the MCC allowed Melbourne to play Carlton at the MCG in June 1877. Admission was sixpence, with a further sixpence to sit in the grandstand. These charges, high for the time, did not discourage the crowds — between 8,000 and 10,000

barrackers attended. The MCC consequently garnered more than £200 from the enterprise, and it was obvious that such matches would continue to be a goldmine for cricket clubs.

The success of the MCC's football deal encouraged the East Melbourne, South Melbourne, and Geelong cricket clubs to offer their grounds for football matches in 1878. The EMCG was a rather cramped space for football but had sufficient length as the goals were still 166 yards apart. In 1878 the MCC made its ground available from May to early July claiming one-third of gate takings, and providing a third to each competing club. Melbourne gained almost exclusive access to the MCG, but Carlton and Hotham secured it for their match on June 22. The EMCC swooped and offered a similar deal to football clubs, with Carlton, which had a much bigger support base than the Melbourne Football Club, gaining almost exclusive occupancy. Hotham and West Melbourne also secured the EMCG for three matches in 1878. The first football match on the EMCG was between Carlton and Hawthorn (Juniors) on 18 May 1878 and drew a crowd of 2,000, double the attendance figure at the Melbourne versus Clifton (Juniors) game at the MCG on the same day.

Not all attendance figures for matches at the EMCG and MCG in 1878 are known, but the Carlton-Melbourne contest at the EMCG drew a crowd reported of between 5,000 and 8,000, which was the same attendance as the earlier match between these two at the MCG on 8 June. Further attendance figures suggest that the EMCG did not unduly suffer in comparison to the MCG during that season. From the figures available, six matches played at the MCG drew an average crowd of about 4,000, while seven matches at the EMCG attracted an average crowd of 2,500. The MCG's overall attendance figures for that year were inflated by the popularity of Carlton's two matches against a visiting NSW Waratah side (one played by rugby rules, the other by Victorian rules). But the EMCG did not miss out as it hosted Melbourne's two matches against a touring South Australian club.¹¹

Football matches on the MCG raised considerable revenue and in 1879 the MCC added another month, August, to the football calendar. Once again, Melbourne Football Club was granted the lion's share of this opportunity, while Hotham was offered what was left. Carlton sided with the EMCG, as did West Melbourne. It is not difficult to see why, as Carlton's game against Geelong at the EMCG on 14 June drew the largest crowd of the year, between 12,000 and 13,000, and Carlton likely received a more than reasonable cut from the EMCC for this contest. The game was so popular that thousands could not get into the ground, and it was reported that:

The interest taken by the Melbourne ladies in this manly game is so great ... [and the] scene was a most remarkable one, the like of which could not be seen in any country but Australia. Fully 13,000 persons

were assembled... and this immense crowd were kept in order simply by their own sense of fair play, for of the three policemen visible on the ground, two kept modestly in the background, and the other only showed prominently for a few moments at half-time.¹²

This report is significant for its description of the predominantly well-mannered tone of the EMCG crowd. Thus the culture of football at this ground was of a self-regulated set of barrackers, a precondition for what was to follow in the evolution of a distinctive Essendon Football Club following.

The EMCG was also the first venue to host an Inter-Colonial football match when Victoria met South Australia. The teams played two games in early July and drew an aggregate crowd of around 18,000, although not everyone paid to see the games.¹³ A match of this importance added considerably to the cultural significance of the ground. This reputation was further enhanced when the ground held the first annual Queen's Birthday (24 May) meeting between Geelong and Hotham (North Melbourne) in the same year. This soon became one of the blue-ribbon contests in the VFA calendar and would remain so for over a decade. In response, the MCC relied on the novelty of night football to attract crowds. Games between a pair of junior clubs (5 August) and Melbourne and Carlton (13 August) drew an aggregate crowd of 19,000, although ultimately the experiment with lighting was not a success. Of the nine matches played by Melbourne at the MCG in 1879 the average crowd was about 6,000, while Carlton's three matches at the EMCG attracted an average crowd of 7,000. Although the MCG may have claimed pride of place for sporting events these attendance figures demonstrate that there was little to separate the competing venues. Each vied for major events, and when dealing with the MCC, the EMCG alternative was always a useful bargaining chip when agents tried to negotiate the best deal for their sporting clients.¹⁴

Although the MCG had the edge, the EMCG's competitive rates continued to land it some significant events. It could also boast cheaper entrance fees: by 1886 it was sixpence to enter either the EMCG or the MCG, but only an extra shilling to gain access to the EMCG grandstand, compared to eighteen pence (1s 6d) for the MCG's. However, by the early 1880s improvements to the MCG had made a considerable impact on the MCC's fortunes (membership was 908 in 1880–81), as did the hiring of the talented secretary Benjamin Wardill. In contrast, the EMCG suffered a setback in 1880 when the Melbourne City Council claimed a portion of land that was adjacent to Wellington Parade and annexed the part of the ground that contained a pavilion and stand. This forced the EMCC to invest considerable sums on renovating the ground and it soon ran up a debt of £700. However, the EMCC had a happy knack of turning adversity to its advantage, and by 21 May 1881 when Hotham met South Melbourne, the 5,000 barrackers present saw not only a fine football match but also a rejuvenated playing field that was larger than the MCG. The

Australasian's Peter Pindar hinted that the Melbourne City Council might have been nobbled by a third party, perhaps even the MCC:

The recent alterations to the cricket-ground rendered necessary by the action of the City Council in carrying the street through it — for a purpose at present certainly very mysterious — has given the club the opportunity of providing more liberally for the football matches, with the result of one of the best playing spaces that could well be wished for. The distance between the goal-posts is 180 yards, and it could be extended to 200 if so desired, and the greatest width of an oval formed by the seats surrounding is 150 yards. This, however, is straightened off by a row of flags to 120 yards — quite large enough. The ground is firm and level throughout, and is in every respect a vast improvement on its last year's condition, as its size then was too small, and somewhat cramped the efforts of the players.¹⁵

The 'very mysterious purpose' was never revealed, and today the excised road is a 'dog-leg' known as Wellington Parade South.

In 1882 the ground attracted the interest of one of the VFA's up-and-coming clubs, when Essendon moved from a ground at Flemington Hill to the EMCG. Formed in 1872, the Essendon Football Club was not a foundation member of the VFA, but joined as a senior team in 1878. Co-founder and secretary Alex McCracken was determined to make Essendon a powerhouse club and by the early 1880s he was probably offering 'billets' — in other words, employment — to attract the best recruits. Some of these jobs were probably at the McCracken Brewery in Elizabeth Street, near the Bush Inn Hotel. By 1882 the new club finished second, a position it maintained in 1884 and 1885. A proposal in 1882 to relocate the club to the Essendon Recreation Reserve was lost on the casting vote of the mayor, Cr James Taylor. The dissenting councilors wanted to protect the place of cricket at what later became known as Windy Hill.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, the club's supporters in the young suburb of Essendon were not pleased with the move to the EMCG, but the ground turned out to be financially very lucrative for the Essendon Football Club, attracting more spectators than any other ground in Australia.¹⁷ It was a mutually beneficial partnership, most likely brought about by the connections and negotiating skills of the dynamic McCracken. McCracken served as Vice-President of the EMCC from 1893 to 1910, and was installed as the first president of the VFL when it was formed toward the end of 1896.

After playing nine matches at its new ground in 1882, Essendon announced that it was £80 in debt. This deficit could be explained by the cost of the team trip to Tasmania in 1882 and by outlays on improving the EMCG to prepare it for senior football. However, the administration concluded that 'the club having now ... established itself, was in a position to make

good its losses during the coming season, as it had again secured the East Melbourne Ground for its matches... and with the opportunities for practice thus afforded, a very successful season was anticipated'.¹⁸ This confidence was not misplaced: a year later, the largest ever attendance at the club's AGM at Gunsler's Café received the news that the 1883 debt had been completely recovered — including the costs expended on a team tour of Adelaide in 1883. The club now showed a profit of £78 and, not unexpectedly, the officials announced that Essendon Football Club was deepening its relationship with the EMCC with almost exclusive occupancy. By 1885 Essendon was doing so well that its recorded profit of £61 was gained after having already spent £133 on a team trip to Tasmania and another £57 on medical costs for players. The club continued to record increasing profits for the rest of the decade, as well as record membership numbers. In 1885 there were 350 members and in 1886 this increased to 500. By the time of the 1886 AGM the club was becoming so popular that membership was limited to 600 because the EMCG grandstand could not accommodate many more football membership ticket holders. Management also explained where the profits were coming from: of their 1886 financial turnover £423 was received from the EMCC for their share of match receipts and only a quarter of that — £124 — derived from member subscriptions. By 1887 the EMCG boasted its own scoreboard as a symbol of its newly acquired financial bounty, just three years after a scoreboard was built at the MCG.

Unlike the Essendon Football Club, the Melbourne Football Club was the poor cousin in its partnership with the cricket club that controlled its home ground. The football club was forced off its old Richmond Paddock field in 1883 and could not get enough home games at the MCG because the MCC preferred that Carlton play its big matches there. This forced Melbourne to move to the Friendly Societies Ground (the FSG, latterly known as Olympic Park), but after spending considerable sums on bringing that field up to speed the club had no chance of paying off its debt. They were ultimately rescued from this situation in 1889 when the MCC that took over the FSG. The EMCC had no such problems with its tenant Essendon, but matters did not go entirely its way: its attempt to gain permission to erect a pavilion on land next to the railway tracks in 1885 was rejected.

By the 1880s the EMCG was a major centre for football matches, with one of Melbourne's biggest football clubs as a satisfied tenant. But what role did the ground play in the lives of people from the inner eastern suburbs from 1878 to 1921? How strongly did the ground reflect the spirit of this general neighbourhood? There is no doubt that Essendon was an exceptional club in its relationship to the EMCG and its supporters. Essendon's move to the EMCG was an anomaly when one considers that the growth of football's popularity, from which the VFA greatly benefited in the 1880s, was closely

aligned with the growing sense of tribalism and affiliation with local clubs that various suburbs exhibited. This was why clubs like Fitzroy, Richmond, Port Melbourne and Footscray had been welcomed to the VFA, and Collingwood's entry in 1892 continued this trend. This reflected broader patterns in Melbourne's population base during the period:

During the decade after 1881 Melbourne's population grew by 40.3%, from 191,000 to 268,000 ... During the 1880s the city's expanding suburbs absorbed over 200,000 new citizens. Population distribution altered markedly. City and inner suburban population declined sharply, from 70 to 54% of Melbourne's total population. The main share of the population increase went to newer municipalities (Brunswick, Footscray, Essendon) bordering the established inner suburbs.¹⁹

Essendon was clearly bucking this trend when it transferred to the EMCG during a period in which the population in the inner city declined. In contrast, the suburb of Essendon had one of the highest percentage increases of population in Melbourne during the 1880s. Essendon could not be as dependent on the support of local communities of support as Geelong, South Melbourne, Collingwood, Richmond, North Melbourne and other clubs. Instead, it benefited from Melbourne's improving public transport network during the 1880s that facilitated access for a growing metropolitan population to public events in the inner city. These included theatres, concerts, markets and sports grounds. Crowds at important football matches increased from 10,000 in the early 1880s to around 30,000 by the end of the decade.

It should also be noted that the Essendon Football Club had been established by members of a pastoral establishment that occupied land in the northern part of Melbourne. These men were closely associated with organisations such as the Royal Agricultural Society, the Melbourne Hunt Club, and the Moonee Valley Club.²⁰ Their sons attended Melbourne Grammar School and Scotch College, following in the lead of the McCrackens, who were staunch Presbyterians. From the start the club was closely aligned with Scotch College and 20 per cent of its playing group in the seasons from 1873 to 1877 were old boys of that school, then located in East Melbourne. As the years progressed, Essendon's team lists included men who went on to become some of the colony's foremost judges, lawyers, and doctors. The club maintained a strong connection with private schools that provided a continuing source of raw football talent. It was only when the University Football Club was admitted to the VFL in 1908 that Essendon's connections with the elite schools weakened as it relied more its local zones for players. This ultimately assisted the club's return to the suburb of Essendon in 1922.

Having their own ground was of symbolic and practical importance to both the EMCC and the Essendon Football Club. A ground becomes literally the home of the club. The players get to know the feel of the turf, the vagaries

of the local wind patterns, and the angle of the sun at different points of the afternoon. Since the East Melbourne ground ran north-south, this produced its own combination of wind and sun.²¹ Crowds are also a local factor — the 'barrackers' feel an attachment because to *their* club, a symbol of who they themselves are and where they live. What images arose in people's minds when they spoke of the EMCG? With what was it associated? There was an aura at the EMCG that was as unique as that associated with the MCG. The EMCG was a 'bogey' ground for clubs that struggled on its narrow playing field. In 26 matches at the EMCG, Geelong lost 19; South Melbourne lost all but one of its first 10 attempts at the ground. In 1914 a correspondent suggested that the EMCG's 'cramped and muddy surroundings ... was a big handicap against South Melbourne and Geelong [and they] have never overcome their superstition that ill luck dogs their footsteps at East Melbourne'.²² There was also no want of spirit or atmosphere at the stadium. In June 1885 during the top-of-the-table clash between Essendon and visitors Geelong, the home side took the lead and 'the applause became uproarious, and could be heard as far off as the Punt-hill, South Yarra'.²³ In May 1890 a crowd of 34,504 — the biggest attendance of the year and one of the largest in the first fifty years of the game — saw the 'Same Old' (Essendon) play South Melbourne, the reigning premiers.

Essendon was well supported when it won four consecutive premierships from 1891 to 1894. Perhaps its biggest drawcard was Albert Thurgood, a centre half forward who was tall, athletic and a thumping kick. Thurgood was involved in a classic encounter between Essendon and Melbourne in July 1893, when Essendon made a comeback that culminated in an equalising goal late in the game. This elicited a scene that 'almost beggars description. Hats and sticks were thrown into the air, umbrellas and flags waved and a perfect sea of red and black handkerchiefs appeared as if by magic all round the ground'.²⁴

The EMCG also hosted a regular group of Essendon barrackers who gloried in the sobriquet 'The Corner'. The Corner first emerged in 1889 and wrote 'The Same Old' theme song (from which the club's first nickname was derived) and other ditties to entertain fellow supporters during matches. In 1889 the *Essendon and Flemington Chronicle* referred to 'Essendon's Barrackers [sic] who, with their "singing band" are now a recognised institution, [and] occupied nearly half the grandstand and enclosure [of the EMCG] in front and rendered several musical selections with great gusto, being led by conductors who vigorously beat the air with red and black flags'.²⁵ Essendon's supporters were as 'one-eyed' as any others and in May 1891 a journalist from the *Australasian* complained after a match of the:

... rabid Essendon barrackers who occupied the north-west corner of the stand, and whose applause from first to last was most ungenerously one-sided. These same colour-blind partisans hooted

the umpire many and many a time when his decisions, though absolutely just, happened to be against their team.²⁶

However, Essendon ultimately did not have a local ground with a strong local following. Carlton also did not have a local ground, but could rely on long tradition of inner-city support. When the 'Same Old's' were chasing a fourth premiership in a row, there were many reasons why Essendon residents might become enamoured with the club. Yet, after a match between Essendon and Port Melbourne at the EMCG in May 1894, a reporter from the *Age* made some important distinctions between the visiting barrackers and the local contingent of Essendon supporters:

... [J]udging by the enthusiasm displayed whenever Port Melbourne did anything that was not absolutely tame, it was evident that the seaiders formed by far the majority of those present. Essendon rather lack that peculiar form of encouragement in which the barracker is so lavish. There is often an absence of local element in their matches. It does not follow that because the club bears the name of a large and populous suburb that its players are necessarily resident there. Many of them in fact only know Essendon because they have seen it on the map, and besides any local characteristic is dulled by the home matches of the club being played at East Melbourne. But none the less, Essendon has an immense following among the general public, and whenever they play a match against foemen who are deemed worthy of their steel, partisans of the club present a mighty array. But in what are regarded as the 'soft' matches, the proceedings are left to the generosity of the other side.²⁷

An unusual episode around this time reveals an interesting conflation of Essendon with its football ground in East Melbourne. In 1890, when it was decided that Lord Hopetoun, the Governor of Victoria, would declare that Essendon had attained town status, the proclamation ceremony was held, not in the Town itself, but at the EMCG!²⁸ Yet, the Essendon Football Club had lost its emotional attachment to the suburb of Essendon during the EMCG period. This is one explanation for why a new Essendon club was formed under the post-1897 VFA. It likely satisfied a need in the community to have a truly local club, but may have also been a strategic decision, namely, a case in which the amateur VFA sought to compete with the new professional VFL by establishing a rival Essendon club in identical strip.

It is noteworthy that when the play-off for a VFA premiership was necessary for only the second time, in the 1896 season, East Melbourne was selected as the venue, even though the Essendon Football Club was not playing in the match. The creation of the new format for VFL finals, a series of elimination matches replacing the round-robin, arose from the success of this venture,

but the MCG became the preferred venue for VFL finals. As it always had done the EMCC continued to hold major football events despite the MCG's dominance in this area. In 1903, 1905–07, 1913–14 and 1919–20 the EMCG hosted the VFA Grand Final. It did not have the same drawing capacity of VFL Grand Finals at the MCG but the EMCC earned enough revenue from such events to extend facilities at the EMCG during the VFL period. In 1909 a second two-storey grandstand was built to replace the old pavilion at the northern end, complementing the 1885 grandstand. This grandstand was taken to the Glenferrie Oval when the cricket club merged with Hawthorn in 1921, where it stood until 1965.²⁹

When University and Richmond joined the VFL in time for the 1908 season, bringing the number of League teams to 10, it was logical for them to be based at the other two inner-Melbourne grounds on either side of the MCG in Yarra Park. The home ground advantage that the ground gave to University is evident in their results: University won only 27 of its 126 matches (21 per cent) as a VFL team, but it won 54 per cent of its games at East Melbourne. University Football Club was destined not to succeed at the senior level — it was comprised exclusively of university students and graduates. In a city with only one university, where tertiary education was a minority experience, this provided an insufficient pool of qualified players. The 'Students' were strict amateurs during a period when match payments were becoming more common, and their commitment to football competed with the usual distractions of the undergraduate life.³⁰ In time, a new VFA club known as Melbourne City replaced University as a tenant at the EMCG when that VFL club moved to the MCG in 1911.

In 1920 the EMCC was informed that its ground would be reclaimed for use by the Victorian Railways. The EMCC appealed to its old rival the MCC for approval to move to the Albert Ground, a reserve facing Albert Park Lake that was shared between the MCC and the Lawn Tennis Association of Victoria. The president of the MCC was sympathetic, but the old club found it 'impossible to make any satisfactory arrangements' to vary its lease of the Albert Ground, which was 'indispensable to the MCC if it were to continue to play club cricket'.³¹ The EMCC then raised the matter with the Minister of Lands, but no headway was made. Essendon Football Club now had to look for a new home ground. In the following months the Royal Agricultural Society suggested a move to the Showgrounds and Collingwood offered to share Victoria Park. The most attractive offer came from North Melbourne, which offered to amalgamate with Essendon and share the North Melbourne Recreation Reserve. This would have allowed North Melbourne to move straight into the VFL, and in fact it resigned from the VFA in anticipation of the transition.

In January 1921 a group of Essendon citizens formed a 'Back to Essendon' movement to entice the club to the suburb. Cr Arthur Showers was at the forefront and worked assiduously to prevent the merger between Essendon and North Melbourne. There was a body of opinion that favoured an amalgamation, but Showers eventually found a law that only permitted the use of the North Melbourne Recreation Reserve for residents of North Melbourne. The club thus returned to Essendon, which probably did not present as traumatic a departure for the Essendon Football Club as it did for the EMCC, which amalgamated with the Hawthorn Cricket Club. After withdrawing from the VFL during the Great War, Essendon returned to the competition in 1918 and finished last. It followed this by finishing sixth in 1919 and 1920 and unhappily secured the 'wooden spoon' again in 1921. Being at a low ebb it would seem that the club had nothing to lose by returning to the suburb whose name it carried, or at least it may have hoped that such a move would be a spur to help it recover some of its former glory. Season 1922 at its new ground was a good year on the field for Essendon and this may have helped to mollify any lingering criticism about the relocation. Moreover, the club's old local supporter base was reactivated and expanded after winning back-to-back premierships in 1923 and 1924. The EMCG had also become tired and run down because of the insecurity of the EMCC's tenure, and after Essendon moved to Windy Hill, it was reported that 'Essendon's new quarters are like fairyland compared to the drab, cramped and unattractive East Melbourne ground'.³² These factors all assisted in the process of severing ties with the EMCG. In a symbolic gesture however the *Essendon Gazette* reported that there was 'the demand by players and supporters alike that the old posts originally used at East Melbourne should go to Essendon with the team. This has been complied with'.³³

And so, without a murmur of public dissent, the East Melbourne ground came to an end in October 1921. Its closure had been announced publicly at the end of 1920. Despite its 40-year association with the EMCG, Essendon Football Club was not a local club with strong ties to the local community. Therefore, when the time to vacate was made there were no local supporters' groups protesting to keep Essendon there. The East Melbourne Ground's demise had an ironical twist at the very end. Appropriately, almost the last senior match played at the Ground was interrupted by a violent storm and had to be stopped for a few minutes during the third quarter. It was a wonderful way to finish at this oval because neither side was able to claim a victory. It was as if the footballing heroes of yesterday were left frozen in struggle for all time, the memories and ghosts of this once famous ground trapped under the weight of the new railway tracks.

Notes

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- 1 *VFL on Film, vol. 1, 1909–45: Marking Time*, National Film & Sound Archive, 1996. 22 minutes [Copy available at VU Library.]
- 2 Andrew Brown-May and Shurlee Swain (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Melbourne*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2005. Nor does the Ground rate a mention alongside Waverley Park in the entry for 'Sports Grounds and Venues'. It is mentioned briefly in two entries, 'Essendon Football Club' and 'Jolimont'. John Cordner, David Allen, Paul Daffey, Robin Grow and June Seynard, *Black & Blue: The Story of Football at the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne University Football Club, University of Melbourne, 2007, p. 48.
- 3 MCC historian Trevor Ruddell (private correspondence) contends that the Old Lonsdale Cricket Ground lay within the present-day Gosch's Paddock, immediately south of Swan Street. If one were to draw a line between the Richmond Cricket Ground (Punt Road Oval) and the Morrell Bridge (off Anderson Street) the old Lonsdale Cricket Ground would be bisected by it. By the 1880s it was referred to as the Botanical Reserve. It seems that the entire area of Yarra Park (west of Punt Road and south of Wellington Parade to the Yarra River) was called Lonsdale's Paddock, and later the Police Paddock. By the 1860s it is proper to refer to the area as Richmond Paddock.
- 4 A. E. Clarke, *East Melbourne Cricket Club: Its History ... Jubilee Year*, George Robertson & Co., Melbourne, 1910.
- 5 Geoffrey Blainey, *A Game of Our Own: The Origins of Australian Football*, Information Australia, Melbourne, 1990, rev. ed., 2003.
- 6 *Australasian*, 12 December 1868, p. 747; Alf Batchelder, *Pavilions in the Park: A History of the Melbourne Cricket Club and its Ground*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2005, p. 108.
- 7 Batchelder, *Pavilions*, p. 146. See also Gillian Hibbins, *Sport and Racing in Colonial Melbourne*, Lynedoch Publications, Melbourne, 2007, p. 191.
- 8 *Australasian*, 1 July 1876, p. 12.
- 9 The EMCG was unable to have its grandstand erected in time for the tour so Lillywhite changed his mind and went with the MCC after it erected the MCC's new grandstand (considered one of the best in the world) at the end of 1876. The admission charged for access to the grandstand increased the MCC's revenue, but the EMCC was compensated. See Batchelder, *Pavilions*, pp. 146–50.
- 10 *Australasian*, 2 September 1876, p. 300.
- 11 These attendance figures are based on contemporary newspaper accounts.

- 12 *Argus*, 16 June 1879, p. 7.
- 13 *Australasian*, 14 June 1879, p. 748.
- 14 See for example Batchelder, *Pavilions*, pp. 162–64.
- 15 *Australasian*, 28 May 1881, p. 684.
- 16 Grant Aldous, *The Stop-over that Stayed: A History of Essendon*, City of Essendon, Moonee Ponds, Vic., n.d. [1979], p. 136.
- 17 Aldous, *The Stop-over that Stayed*, p. 138.
- 18 *Australasian*, 7 April 1883, p. 423.
- 19 Maggie Indian, 'Formalisation of Urban Leisure: Melbourne 1880–1900', in Richard Cashman and Michael McKernan (eds), *Sport: Money, Morality and the Media*, University of NSW Press, Kensington, NSW, p. 273.
- 20 Bob Stewart, *The Australian Football Business: A Spectator's Guide to the VFL*, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, NSW, 1983, p. 36.
- 21 Clarke, *East Melbourne Cricket Club*.
- 22 C.L. Andrews, *The Winner*, 16 September 1914, p. 6.
- 23 *Argus*, 15 June 1885, p. 10.
- 24 *Age*, 3 July 1893, p. 7.
- 25 *Essendon and Flemington Chronicle*, 2 August 1889, p. 7c , 19 July 1889, p. 3a.
- 26 *Australasian*, 23 May 1891, p. 978.
- 27 *Age*, 21 May 1894, p 6.
- 28 Michael Maplestone, *Flying Higher: History of the Essendon Football Club, 1872–1994*, Essendon Football Club, The Author, Melbourne, 1994, p. 34.
- 29 Santo Caruso, *Football Grounds of Melbourne*, Pennon Publishing, Melbourne, 2002, p. 58.
- 30 Cordner, *Black & Blue*, pp. 49–51. Also see Rob Hess, Matthew Nicholson, Bob Stewart and Gregory De Moore, *A National Game: The History of Australian Rules Football*, Viking, Melbourne, 2008, pp. 123–24.
- 31 Batchelder, *Pavilions*, p. 490.
- 32 Undated report from the *Herald*, 1922.
- 33 *Essendon Gazette*, 11 May 1922, p. 1.